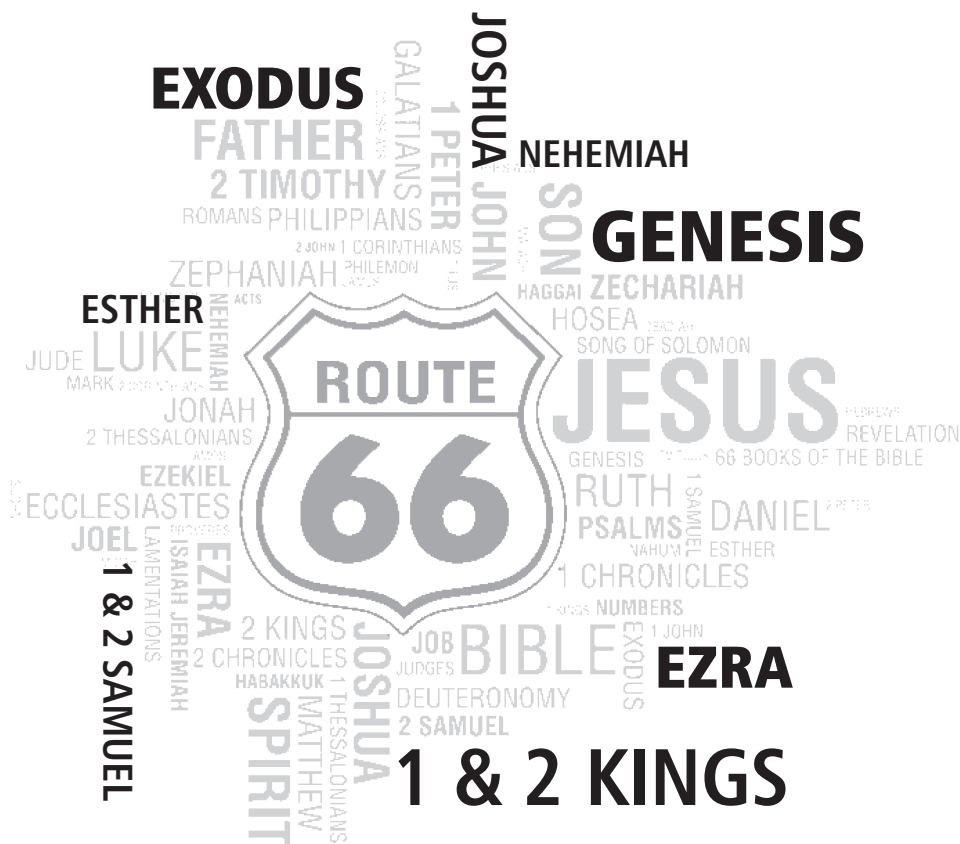


Week 1: Living faithfully



*The narrative literature
and its application to life*



Day 1: The ride of our lives

Luke is funny. He is clever. He is 145 cm tall and has brown eyes.

What is your mental image of Luke from that description? Are you imagining a small clown turning cartwheels? Are you thinking geeky and peculiar? Awkward and studious? Scheming and tricking? I'm afraid all of these are way off mark. Describing anyone in terms of a few physical features and personality traits falls seriously short. So let me introduce you to my son Luke another way – with a story.

Yesterday Luke brought his schoolwork home. When we asked why he hadn't completed the work at school, he explained crossly that he had been waiting in the queue to get the materials from the teacher when he saw one of his friends struggling. He went over to help him out and rejoined the queue. Just as he was almost at the front he spotted a girl crying, so he went over to give her a hand and by the time he rejoined the queue again, she was smiling. By the end of the lesson he had helped half the class in one way or another, but had hardly started his project. When his teacher saw his work, she told him off for "doing nothing" and gave him a warning.

Just from this one short story, we gain an insight into the way Luke relates to others, his selflessness, and his sense of justice. We read "clever" as mentally resourceful, and "funny" as good at making other people smile. But more than just picturing him, you are probably beginning to relate to Luke. You may even have begun to think about what you would do in his shoes or what you would say to him if you were his teacher, his friend or his parent.

Statements like "Luke is 145 cm tall" are important. But they are merely the bones of a skeleton when it comes to getting to know somebody. A story fleshes out the description, giving us a clearer picture of the person and offering us the possibility of intimacy and relationship. When God introduces himself to us in the beginning of the Bible, he does so through story after story after story. This has a number of effects:

1. Stories reveal God's character¹²

Not just in terms of abstract concepts that could be misconstrued, but also in terms of concrete examples. For the most part the story of the Bible is a retelling of how God has connected characters, communities, continents and the cosmos itself in his great big story for all of creation, making the character of the invisible God visible to us.

¹² See Newbiggin, L., 1989, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, SPCK, p. 99.

2. Stories draw us into the story

Stories abduct our emotions, stealing them away into the drama as we recognize the dilemmas and empathize with the characters.¹³ By experiencing the stories God has given us in this way, our imagination, our ambition and our lives are drawn into the captivating narrative of the Bible.

3. Stories draw us into relationship

As we see God's character in action, we get to know different aspects of his personality and foundations for a relationship are built as we share his hopes and heartaches.

4. Stories make us who we are

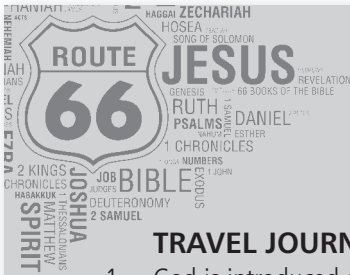
"In order to make sense of our lives and to make our most important decisions, we depend on some story."¹⁴ In a world of competing stories the Bible tells us true stories about the way things really happened so that we can be caught up into God's ultimate story of the grand sweep of history. Sometimes we zoom in and see the fine detail – like in the story of Joseph and his jealous brothers. Other times we zoom out to see the genealogies that summarize generations of stories where God was faithful to his people. It has been said that history is His Story, but it is also our story, as we too belong somewhere in the sweep of history described between Genesis 1 and Revelation 21.

5. Stories change our lives

One sweltering summer's day my wife and I heard a story about a beautiful newborn baby girl who had no home to go to, as her birth mother was unable to care for her. She was lying in the hospital that hot afternoon, oblivious to the uncertainties of her future as social workers phoned around possible placements. We were newly approved foster carers. On hearing this story we faced a choice. Our decision to get involved in the story of this little girl had life-changing consequences as we first fostered her, then adopted her, loving her as our own daughter. Reading the stories of the Old Testament comes with a health warning: the more we get to know God, and the more we get drawn into the Bible story, the harder it will be to ignore the invitation to join the ride of our lives in God's big plan for the universe.

¹³ See Sweet, L., McLaren, B. & Hasselmayer, J., 2003, *A is for Abductive: The Language of the Emergent Church*, Zondervan, pp. 31–33.

¹⁴ See Bartholomew, C. & Goheen, M., 2006, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding our place in the biblical story*, SPCK, p. 1.



TRAVEL JOURNAL: Genesis 1:1–31

1. God is introduced as the lead character in the story of the Bible. How does this story seek to inspire awe in you as you read? (See verses 1, 3 and 16.)
2. The story of the beginning of the universe is told with great artistry. Where do you notice repetitions, poetry or unusual turns of phrase?
3. The hinge-point of the story seems to be the creation of human beings (verses 27–31). Find four differences compared to the rest of creation. Why are they significant?
4. Use the five points about how stories help us to engage with Genesis 1. How does this story:
 - ⊕ reveal God's character?
 - ⊕ draw us into relationship?
 - ⊕ draw us into the story?
 - ⊕ make us who we are?
 - ⊕ change our lives?

Day 2: **Mirror, signal, manoeuvre**

Of the 4,000 or more volumes that my wife and I own, there is one that I particularly treasure. It is one of my smallest and scruffiest books and even the letters on its spine have been rubbed away. But every time I see it, I remember the romance of a day twenty years earlier. I was in Shakespeare's Stratford with my soon-to-be fiancée when we discovered this compact copy of *Romeo and Juliet* in a second-hand shop. Sitting by the river in view of the Swan Theatre, I gave that book as a farewell present to my girlfriend as she left to spend a year working in Germany. Somehow we survived the long-distance relationship and that copy of *Romeo and Juliet* now sits on our shelf reminding us of young love, of the pain of separation, and of the hope of return.

If I were to tell you that some recent visitors to my home spotted that famous romantic tragedy on my bookshelf, and had never heard of it before, I guess you would be surprised. But imagine your shock if I then added that I could summarize the play in just thirteen words:

- ⊕ Hate destroys families.
- ⊕ Love is stronger than hate.
- ⊕ Love is stronger than death.

The statements are true enough, but the story has been stripped of its plot, its suspense, its beauty, its emotions, its characters, and its context. My summary may have left my visitors a little more informed, but I doubt I would have inspired them to go away and discover the play for themselves.

Many of the sermons I hear, and even many I have preached, easily end up as a bland set of bullet-points, often handily beginning with the same letter! For example, you could go away from a sermon based on the story of the call of Abraham in Genesis 12 with these lessons:

- ⊕ God is patient.
- ⊕ God is generous.
- ⊕ God is missionary.

Here are three true statements,¹⁵ but the Bible passage, which started out as a story, has ended up as systematic theology. This is as dissatisfying as going into

¹⁵ Kevin Vanhoozer puts it well: "The gospel is informative: 'he is risen.' Without some propositional core, the church would lose its *raison d'être*, leaving only programs and pot-lucks. At the same time, to reduce the truth of Scripture to a set of propositions is unnecessarily reductionist." Vanhoozer, K., 2005, "Lost in Interpretation? Truth, Scripture and Hermeneutics", *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 48/1, March 2005, p. 100.

a restaurant and ordering their best soup, and being given instead a list of the ingredients. Or visiting the Louvre to see a Renaissance masterpiece, only to discover that scientists had immortalized the exhibits by distilling the paints into test-tubes arranged in alphabetical order of their chemical composition. Sometimes we are in danger of reducing the Bible so much, that although we may find a truth, we lose the sensation and the impact that the story was supposed to produce.¹⁶

It is the basic assumption in this book that God in his wisdom inspired the Scriptures and gave us just the kind of book that we needed. It is no accident or mistake that God inspired so much of the Bible to be in story form and preserved those stories over the millennia so they would be handed down in the format we see in front of us. Of course God could have sent us bullet-points instead, but he chose not to. God's aim was not that we boil these stories down to their bare minimum ingredients. God's aim was the opposite – that the stories could boil over into the messy reality of our lives.

In order to understand *Romeo and Juliet*, we need to understand the language and the culture that Shakespeare was writing in. But that tragic play set in the fifteenth century, with its rigid conventions of marriage, still has an impact in our more liberal society. The stories of the Bible are not human works of fiction, like Shakespearean plays, but divine accounts of history and therefore have endless potential to impact our own lives. Nevertheless, we still need to acknowledge the presence of the two worlds, whichever part of the Bible narrative we are reading: the world of the Bible text with its language, culture and time in history, and our world with its very different language, culture and time in history.¹⁷ The following tool of narrative Bible study is adapted from that vital all-terrain habit I learned in my driving lessons: "Mirror, Signal, Manoeuvre".

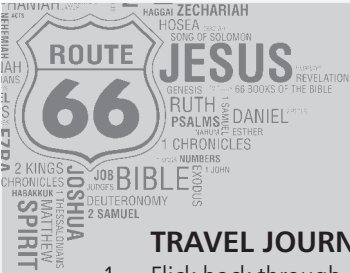
- ⊕ **MIRROR:** Look back and try to understand how the original audience would have experienced the Bible passage.
- ⊕ **SIGNAL:** Ask God to help you to understand the passage's significance today. How is the story used elsewhere in the Bible? How does the story set the course for our lives today?
- ⊕ **MANOEUVRE:** What are you going to do now to change your actions, attitude or understanding as a result of this Bible passage?

Looking back to what a story meant to its first hearers before we look to our own situation may take some getting used to. However awkward and time-consuming it may feel to first look back, and then look around before looking forward, this art

¹⁶ For more on this theme see Arthurs, J. D., 2007, *Preaching with Variety: How to recreate the Dynamics of Biblical Genres*, Kregel.

¹⁷ Stott, J., 1998, *I Believe in Preaching*, Hodder & Stoughton.

of time travel will protect us from the dangers of misapplying the Bible, and will resource us to move forward confidently.



TRAVEL JOURNAL: Genesis 12:1–9

1. Flick back through chapters 9–12. What do we learn about the world as Abram saw it? How do you imagine Abram felt about God’s call in verse 1, and the promises in verses 2–3 and 7? From Abram’s perspective, how does the story work out for him? (Scan through Genesis 12–25.)
2. How does Abram’s call set the direction for how we understand the life of faith? (See Galatians 3 and Romans 4.)
3. Ultimately God’s promise will be fulfilled at the end of time. How is Abram’s call therefore still applicable to those of us who are his spiritual descendants? (See especially Genesis 12:2–3.)
4. How does Hebrews 11:8–12 help us to live out this story? What are you going to do about this?